



**Testimony of Brenda Kelley,
AARP Connecticut State Director on
The November 24, 2009 Deficit Mitigation Plan for Fiscal Year 2010
Appropriations Committee
December 9, 2009**

Good afternoon Chairman Geragosian, Chairwoman Harp, ranking members Miner and Debicella, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Brenda Kelley and I am the State Director for AARP Connecticut. AARP is a nonprofit, non-partisan membership organization for people age 50 and older. We have more than 40 million members nationwide and over 600,000 in Connecticut.

Today's hearing is another sober and difficult reminder that our state's economy continues a fragile road to recovery. As members of this Committee and Governor Rell again consider state budget priorities and identify additional deficit mitigating cuts, AARP urges Connecticut leaders to weigh the long-term costs and consider how these decisions will impact real people, beyond just the numbers.

Now more than ever, bipartisan approaches must be employed to counteract divisive budget debates among legislators and the Governor that pit one vulnerable constituency against another. We realize these tough economic times call for a re-evaluation of state budget decisions, and we are concerned that the state's revenue shortages will result in cuts to critically important programs such as health care benefits, long-term care support, safety net programs, and transportation. The most recent Deficit Mitigation plan proposed by Governor Rell includes a number of cuts and programmatic changes that would have a detrimental impact on older adults, children and persons with disabilities. These include:

- Elimination of non-emergency dental coverage for adults under Medicaid and SAGA;
- Elimination of eyeglasses coverage for individuals receiving Medicaid;
- Continuation of closed enrollment in the Alzheimer's Respite Care Program; and
- Reductions in low-income energy assistance through Operation Fuel.

While at first glance the Governor's deficit mitigation proposals may appear to involve relatively small cuts across a number of programs, the truth is that each of these cuts is significant in the lives of the people who depend on the programs and services being targeted. Combined with previous cuts already included in the 2010/2011 State Budget and additional administrative changes, the cumulative effects of these cuts on Connecticut's most vulnerable citizens are devastating.

Scores of older adults and low-income residents will feel the effects of the Governor's cuts many times over, because the overlapping eligibility of these programs means that an individual who is receiving assistance from one of these programs is likely to depend on several other state assistance programs as well. Suddenly, those "small cuts", when taken together, add up to real hardship for those most in need of help.

Several individuals will comment today on the specific impacts each of the proposed cuts will have on Connecticut residents. I would like to highlight a few that AARP is particularly concerned about:

Harmful Cuts to Dental and Eyeglasses Coverage under Medicaid

AARP is very concerned with the Governor's proposed elimination of non-emergency dental care for adults under Medicaid and SAGA.

The lack of dental services for the indigent, and especially for older poor people, was in 2000 characterized as a "silent epidemic" by the then-Surgeon General of the United States. Poor people suffer more severe tooth loss than their wealthier counterparts and older people are increasingly susceptible to losing their teeth as they age. AARP believes the Governor's proposed \$4.1 million dollar cut in dental services is shortsighted.

Studies document the profound deleterious effects toothlessness has on health, economic status, and social activities; a blanket denial of non-emergency dental services risks dooming indigent patients to lifetimes of medical problems, joblessness, and social isolation that the state will only end up paying for in a variety of social services programs.

There is growing evidence that poor oral health may cause or contribute to serious medical problems including diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Studies have shown that bacteria from chronic gum infections can enter the bloodstream and damage the heart and other organs. Researchers are also looking into the connection between various gum disease and inflammation in artery lining. When the artery lining becomes inflamed, blood clots form and can cause a heart attack.

In fact, a study from Columbia University's College of Dental Medicine and Aetna insurance company concluded that non-emergency dental services may actually reduce total health care costs. The study tracked 145,000 individuals with diabetes, coronary artery disease or stroke and found that the medical costs associated with those conditions were lower among individuals that sought early treatment for periodontal disease, than those that went without the treatment.

In addition, AARP opposes the elimination of coverage for eyeglasses for individuals receiving Medicaid. Vision is critical to conducting activities of daily living, is a portal for language, and affects developmental learning, communicating, working, health, and quality of life.

For those low-income adults on Medicaid, the cost of prescription eyeglasses is simply out of reach. Many in need of corrective lenses (for driving and other daily and work-related tasks) will be forced to forgo them because they are unaffordable. Eliminating coverage of eyeglasses is shortsighted and will impose another costly burden on those who are already struggling to make ends meet in this economy.

Closed Enrollment and Reduction in Funding for Alzheimer's Respite Care

While millions of family caregivers provide care to loved ones, doing so can also mean health, emotional, and financial challenges for the caregivers themselves. Family caregivers commonly say that they have trouble finding time for themselves, managing emotional and physical stress, and balancing work and family responsibilities.

According to a comprehensive new Caregiver study released this week (*Caregiving in the U.S. 2009*) by the MetLife Foundation and the National Alliance for Caregiving, in conjunction with AARP, one in six caregivers in the U.S. (17%) report that caregiving has had a negative impact on their health. The study also found that the number of caregivers utilizing respite care has more than doubled since 2004 (from 5% to 12%).

Connecticut's Alzheimer's Respite Care program for qualified caregivers offers some financial relief that can be used to defray adult day program costs, the cost of a personal care assistant, or other means allowing a caregiver some time off to recharge.

Unfortunately, Governor Rell has ordered the program shut down. Nearly 265 people are waiting for it to reopen. The Governor is also asking the legislature to cut **half** of the program's \$2.3 million budget.

Given the significant strains on family caregivers and the increased need for informal supports, AARP is opposed to the Governor's proposed cuts to the Alzheimer's Respite Care Program and supports reopening the program for those on the waiting list.

Reductions in Low-Income Energy Assistance programs

AARP supports retaining and releasing the \$4.75 million to Operation Fuel for energy assistance for low income CT residents.

Although they consume approximately the same amount of energy as do younger people, older Americans devote a higher percentage of total household spending to residential energy costs, even after adjusting for weather and home size. Low-income older households spend an average of 13 percent of their income on residential energy. However, about one of every four low-income older households spends 19 percent or more of their entire income on home energy bills. Especially here in the Northeast, heating a home in the winter is not an option. No elderly resident should be forced to choose between buying groceries or paying their heating bill.

For this reason, AARP has been a leader in efforts to ensure affordable utilities for Connecticut consumers and is an active member of the Low-Income Energy Advisory Board.

Operation Fuel, through its statewide network of more than 100 fuel banks, provides emergency energy assistance to lower-income working families, the elderly and the disabled who are in financial crisis and who either are not eligible for or have exhausted government benefits.

In the Deficiency Bill that the legislature passed in June and the Governor signed, \$5 million of the energy funds provided in the 2008 Budget was carried over to be used for energy assistance during the FY'09 to be administered by Operation Fuel. These are the only state funds for energy assistance. On November 5th, the Governor rescinded \$250,000 (5%) of the \$5 million.

In her latest deficit mitigation proposal, the Governor recommends lapsing \$2 million of energy assistance and that the legislature pass legislation to eliminate \$2 million more. That would leave only \$750,000 in state energy assistance funds for 2009. Last winter, Operation Fuel paid out about \$6 million in energy assistance to more than 13,000 households in the state.

Given the continued economic recession and high unemployment rate in Connecticut, it is anticipated that the need for energy assistance this winter will be at least 5% higher than last year.

AARP urges the Legislature to restore full funding for Operation Fuel for emergency energy assistance to lower-income working families, the elderly and the disabled.

Conclusion

During tough economic times, AARP asks our Legislative representatives to remember the people behind the numbers. We've learned from past experience that we must not balance the budget on the backs of lower income seniors, children, people with disabilities and others who most need our help. Not only is it morally wrong, it ultimately results in higher costs over time.

We understand the difficult choices our leaders face during this economic crisis and AARP stands ready and willing to work with the Legislature and the Governor to find ways to balance the budget that does the least amount of harm – to older adults, children, and people with disabilities, to those that are struggling to survive during this recession - and to the state of Connecticut in general.

Thank you.

